Leading from the Heart

Dr. Ronald Carter helping former foster children feel right at home at Johnson C. Smith University.

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For many youth who emancipate or age out of the foster care system when they turn 18, homelessness and incarceration, not higher education, are often the alternatives, say child welfare experts.

But since Dr. Ronald Carter became president of Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C., in 2008, he has made foster care a part of the institution’s strategic plan. He is ensuring that those transitioning out of the foster care system can earn a degree and find emotional and financial support. Fewer than 3 percent of foster youth go on to earn college degrees by age 25, compared with 28 percent nationally, according to findings from the National Youth in Transition Database published in 2010 by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

Carter also is making sure that year-round housing is available, a crucial need for youth no longer in the foster care system. “We see students who don’t always have a home to return to during holidays, summer break or even weekends.”

On Oct. 12, the university broke ground on what will be the site of the Foster Village Network Center, which will be the hub for housing and other programs and services for emancipated foster care youth. The George E. Davis House, a historic African-American landmark built in 1895 and located a block away from the main campus, will be the focal point of the new center.
The cost of restoring the landmark named for Davis, the first African-American professor of Biddle University, now Johnson C. Smith University, is an estimated $800,000, according to Gerald Hector, the university’s vice president for business and finance. Through fundraising, the university has raised about $320,000 of the construction costs and plans to continue its efforts as well as explore other private funds or loans. Hector said the university is here come from homes where the foster parents couldn’t care less about them.”

“And some students have a hard time transitioning to become independent and to being at the university, but they are happy to be here. I know that I am grateful to have made it here,” Ary adds.

Most emancipated students like Ary fund their university education using resources through the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and other government funds designated for foster children. These students also use traditional financial aid packages. But unlike most other foster care financial support programs at colleges and universities, Johnson C. Smith doesn’t offer the emancipated students full scholarships. Instead, emancipated students enroll in financial literacy classes and are expected to pay for a portion of their college costs through grants and loans or work. The goal, university officials say, is to also help these students build good credit while they are in school.

It costs on average $23,000 for a student to attend Johnson C. Smith University and live on campus. Notably, the school received a $35 million gift from the Duke Endowment in October, one of the largest gifts ever given to an HBCU.

While Johnson C. Smith isn’t the only college or university to enroll and provide support services for students transitioning from foster care, Carter suggests that his institution is doing what others are not. Working in North Carolina’s Mecklenburg County where the university is located, Carter said, “We are providing a holistic model that incorporates resources in the local community … to address the needs of these students during high school, during their college careers at JCSU and after graduation.”

Carter, a former foster father to four boys, once answered calls from social services when the agency needed to make emergency placements of children day or night. But when the demands of being the provost of Coker College in Hartsville, S.C., made that role impossible, he took his passion for children in need to his campus and faculty.

“When I was at Coker, the program that we set up included weekly campus visits for foster kids so that they could network among themselves. We made social workers available and brought in state social service agencies to the table. Before we knew it, what we were doing had mushroomed into [an] annual conference,” says Carter.

Carter’s model for a foster care initiative has spread across the campus, says Dr. Helen Caldwell, dean of the College of Professional Studies and a professor of social work.

Caldwell says more than 40 students are enrolled in the university’s Foster Care Initiative, which is supported by faculty and staff from social work, admissions and financial aid along with state-sponsored programs and services.

“We don’t take our hands off of them even when they walk across the stage to receive their degrees,” says Caldwell. “We follow them through until they land jobs. We want to show them that we are an extended family and that they have support here.”